How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium

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It is finally summer- you are finally free. All school year your mom has been on you like glue about my math, science projects and the stack of reading books that have been assigned. You do what you need to do.

Truth is, you are pretty smart.

Even when you were doing your work, you daydreamed between sentences. Basketball is more than just ball. It is a way out. You invest in yourself. You spend way too much time in the back-alley ball handling drills.

THE FATE OF YOUR HOOP DEVELOPMENT

For the past three years you have spent every free minute playing basketball. Most nights you are throwing the ball, even after the sun falls behind the ocean and the automatic street lights go on.

You invest in basketball. Your game is going to blast off.

Your skills are good. You are able to put the ball in the hoop from twenty-five feet away. You are quick. You can get into the paint at will and finish with either hand.

This past season you scored more points than any other 8th grade student. You know that is not good enough if you want to dominate or rule in high school.

Your ears perk up. You hear two people talking about Muni Gym in Balboa Park. Later than day you go to the library and look up Muni Gym. It is right next to the air and Space Museum, which is about five miles away from your father’s job at the factory.

You walk into the cramped or crowded living room to work up the guts to talk to your dad about the gym. You are too good for the gym that you have been going to. It is now time to go to a gym that will help your advance.

Pops is watching TV. He has a toothpick in his mouth.

“So, What do you think, Pop?

“About what?”

“Would it be cool if I went with you to work every morning? So I could play ball down there?”

Pops turns away, and you take this as a no. But you might be wrong.

You think he will eventually say yes. Your heart races.

THERE’S ONLY TODAY

Know that when the alarm rings, it will be dark. It will be 4:30 in the morning. Your brain will try to sweet-talk you into going back into bed. It will tell you not to get up and go to Muni Gym. Your brain will tell you, you can go tomorrow.

Reach up into your brain, and make the right decision. Crawl out of bed. Think of your dad. Think of your uncles. They get up early each and every day. Respect them.

Maybe your dad will say one or two sentences to you. Don’t take it personally. Shift your focus. Smell the coffee. Listen to the news.

When pops parks the car near the factory, know that you will have to wait three hours until the gym opens. Know that you will have to be ready to go home at 3:45, or be prepared to walk home.

You try to figure out how your six-foot-one body is going to sleep in this tiny car. You are determined. You find a way to get a little more sleep.

By day three, you know how to sleep in the car. Muni’s Gym is not all that you think it will be. Some day a cop will knock on the windshield with his night stick.

Don’t panic. He is surprised to find a six-foot-one kid in a small car- sleeping.

Your skin is brown. His may be brown too.

By the time you finish telling the cop your plans and goals, he removes his hand from his gun. He will escort you into the factory, and ask to talk to your dad. Your dad will be stressed. He is not stress that he thinks you did something wrong, its just he has had his own problems with the cops.

You pop will tell the truth. Your pop will say, “Mexicans are allowed to sleep.” You will feel love for your father.

All other mornings, you wake up in the car by your phone alarm. You now know all the short cuts. Butterflies dance in your chest.

Here is where you will learn the world.

SENTENCED TO THE BLEACHERS

To an untrained eye, the men at the gym are poor. They are uneducated. They are black. They are mean or crass.

But over the summer, you will learn that they are talented. They have poetry in their banter. You will laugh harder then you ever laughed. They will call you names. They will tell you that you are not good enough to play with them. It is hard to blend in with them off the court.

On the court, you take a beating as well. The men are bigger, stronger and faster. They make you stand on the sidelines.

Your mind will tell you to quit. They don’t let your play. They are prejudiced against Mexicans- or ninth graders.

You don’t give up. You are a baller- not a spectator. You tell your dad you won’t be going, but your body won’t let you quit.

DON’T JUST STAND THERE

Finally, you get a break. It is week four. You know all the guys now by nickname.

You watch Dante. He is six-four and thin. He is about 30 years old. He walks by you like you don’t exist. Dante plays a game with the other guys. He finally looks at you and asks, “Kid why are you still coming here?”

Your body suddenly becomes alert. You look at the man, but you don’t know what to say. The man tells you to leave. Two people walk up to you to remove you from the gym.

Finally your mouth moves, “I just want to play!”

Dante said, “What?”

“I wanna play!”

The two men start to move you, but Dante tells them to stop. “Get away from him! This is between me and the kid!”

The whole gym is silent, aside from your heartbeat.

Dante tells you, “After you get smoked, you walk out of those doors and never come back.”

You realize they are letting you play. If you mess up, its over.

Even though your heart is racing, once the ball is in your hands you calm down. It only takes a minute of dribbling the ball to bring you back to the place you most love. You are able to shake off the cobwebs pout of your brain, and slip into the flow.

You bury a twenty-five foot shot into the basket. The guys in the gym are yelling.

The outside world shrinks and hides. You dance on the court. Your feet move without thinking. You bury two deep jumpers.

Dante is not happy. He says, “Get off my court, kid.”

“But-----“

You have proven that you can play. Every head saw that you have game. Then a guy calls you “Little Buck.”

Finally, Dante walks up to you and tells you to get into the game.

You think that this will be a mentorship, it won’t be. Dante won’t talk to you the rest of the summer. It reminds you of your Pop’s silence.

A few months into your ninth grad season, you spot Dante at one of your fames. You will wave at him, but he won’t wave back. Your old man will be there too.

On the way home you realize something important. Your old man is always there. He always has been. Maybe words are important. Maybe words would just steal away your freedom to think for yourself.

WHAT DID YOU DO THIS SUMMER

Your English test is Mr. Howe. He tells you have fifteen minutes to write about one thing you did this summer, and something you learned.

As you start writing, summer pours out. You realize that the time you spent on the bleachers was more important than the time you spent on the court.

During your last day in the gym, Slim offered to buy you a hot dog and Coke, but you turn him down.

Truth was, you turned him down because you knew he didn’t have the money to treat you. You learned that he lost his security job at the start of the summer. His shoes were falling apart, and he was being evicted from his apartment.

But on the ride home, Pop’s shakes his head. “When a man with nothing offers to give you something, “ he said, “you take it.”

“You do?”

“Always.”

“Why?”

Pops glanced as he was pulling onto the highway. “You just do, all right?”

At that time, it won’t make sense. You saved slim money. But as you write it, you will learn that when a man is mostly quiet, offers you advice, you take it.

“You just do, all right?”

“Trust me.”